

Seniors: One third of the vote, none of the debate

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Mr. Speaker, esteemed members of the Silver Haired Legislature, respected members of the General Assembly, and my fellow South Carolinians:

My name is André Bauer and I am the youngest Lt. Governor in America. But the office I hold is not the defining accomplishment of my life. Being the elected official responsible for the Office on Aging is. Serving as the voice for those who have labored, loved, and lived a full life and who NOW need our assistance and our assurance is what drives me. Your presence here demonstrates that it compels you as well.

As a compassionate people we must honor our obligations to those who have built our state and our country. We must remember that our legacy will be defined by the way we treat our mothers and fathers, our aunts and uncles, our older brothers and sisters, and the nameless man that lives in the back woods down a dusty dirt road in a rural county. We may not know his name -- but like those we hold close, he is a part of us that we cannot forget.

South Carolina has been called the buckle of the Bible belt. We are charged to live spiritual lives with a special emphasis on service to our fellow man. In the Good Book we are commanded to “honor thy mother and thy father”. It is also written and we should take note that the Lord said: “I tell you the truth, whatever you do for the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you do for me.” So how can it be that the quality of the lives of our seniors is not at the forefront of our public conversation?

How can it be that when it comes to specific issues of concern to mature Americans, there is a curious silence by the men and women that seek to lead our country? Simply put, how has the generation that built America come to be viewed as an afterthought by so many of those seeking to lead America?

Before our next president takes the oath of office in January 2009, the first of seventy-eight million baby boomers will be turning 62 and applying for early retirement. They will turn 65 before the end of that first term. Seventy-eight million baby boomers means an increase of almost 150% in the number of people who received Social Security benefits.

The current race for the White House will cost one billion dollars and will be the most costly campaign in history. It is also the first national election since 1928 in which neither party is fielding either an incumbent president or vice president.

With so many states holding early primaries, including South Carolina, we should know within four months who our choices will be in November 2008. Which leads me to my question - How can we be in such a rush to make this decision, and yet so reluctant to hold a conversation about the real issues that will confront the next President of the United States? How can so many of our candidates ignore the single largest and most important demographic group in the United States?

I say to you that we cannot -- that as South Carolinians and as Americans we are derelict in our obligations if we do not press for a thoughtful and productive discussion of the issues confronting our elderly.

The number of adults aged 65 and older in South Carolina and in the United States is doubling. It is time -- in fact it is well past time -- for the candidates who are asking for our votes to tell us how they will manage this demographic age wave and its impact on the health, independence, and quality of life of millions of people.

How will the next president of the United States address the desires of our senior population for independence and choice in their medical, residential and community care?

Will a Mitt Romney presidency, for example, continue the Bush administration's goal for more choices? Will he enhance care options for those services by insisting that resources follow the person, not the bureaucracy, or will he return to the stagnant days of the past, where seniors were meant to be warehoused quietly till their demise? I ask Governor Romney to state clearly his views on the issues of senior choice, and self-direction of senior care.

I say that Barack Obama, for example, needs to speak out about Alzheimer's and care giving. We now have almost five million people 65 and older with Alzheimer's and other dementias, and 70% of that population lives at home, cared for by family and friends.

Direct and indirect costs of Alzheimer's are now more than one hundred forty-eight billion annually, but in less than a decade the Medicare portion alone is projected to be one hundred eighty-nine billion.

Senator Obama, tell us how you will lead us in the face of a looming crisis in care giving, where ten million Americans are now caring for loved ones with Alzheimer's -- and one-third of these caregivers are already 60 years or older themselves.

Retiring baby boomers will leave open about fourteen million jobs that Generation X simply doesn't have enough people to fill. I ask John McCain, how should our next president create incentives for baby boomers to remain in the workforce? How can a McCain presidency assist the marketplace in retaining the skills, knowledge and wisdom of our experienced workers? What will you do, Senator McCain, to ensure that our economy remains strong in the face of global competition and uncertainty -- especially facing the prospect of a labor shortage at home?

Which man or woman asking for our vote here in 2007 can promise us that he or she will stand with seniors if they assume these and many

other obligations in 2009? Who will declare that protection from exploitation, abuse and neglect should be the accepted norm? Who will ensure that those who prey on the frail, ill or elderly suffer swift punishment? We have bipartisan support for an Elder Justice Act before the Congress of the United States– but we have no White House candidate demanding its immediate passage.

Fred Thompson, will you tell America why this is an important cause? Senator, will you be the first candidate to insist on passage of the Elder Justice Act by our Congress?

I want to hear from Hillary Clinton about senior housing, and how she will ensure that seniors live in dignity, not squalor. Will she use the carrot or the stick -- or both -- to encourage America to embrace the changing needs of our housing stock, and to modify tax, zoning and building laws to encourage housing that all seniors can enjoy? How does she propose that we provide for an aging population that is increasingly marooned in suburbia without adequate transportation to the services they so dearly need? Senator Clinton -- the seniors of America deserve to hear your plan.

I submit that when John Edwards mentions health care that he must discuss Medicaid and Medicare, and how he will keep their funds solvent. Many speeches have been given, studies conducted and papers written about this grave problem, but the issues remain vague to most citizens. Senator Edwards, not only do I ask for your complete position on these two indispensable programs -- but I pray that you put the best minds available to you on the task of making these programs - along with their shortcomings and their solutions -- comprehensible to us all.

Because our country is experiencing unprecedented growth in our senior population, we must have a commitment to keeping the senior population in their homes and communities.

Will Bill Richardson encourage coordination of resources so that modest investments in home and community based services can mean tremendous savings to the two largest health programs in America, programs that spend billions on health care for seniors each year.

Just as preventative medicine and coordinated care saves money by reducing costly treatment, a mere one thousand dollars in Older Americans Act funding could help create the social supports that keep a senior independent. Just one nutritious meal a day could defer or delay the expense of a twenty-seven thousand dollar Medicare hospital admission, or a forty-five thousand dollar Medicaid nursing home bed.

Governor Richardson, let the taxpayers know how you can enhance service to seniors while wringing value from their hard earned dollars.

Now more than ever, we need a national discussion and national leadership that forces interaction between the massively funded health insurance programs and the tiny amount of home and community based programs that offer these preventive services.

Can Mike Huckabee, a man who has personally faced health challenges, effectively manage and coordinate the gigantic federal programs so that they benefit not only seniors, but add value and economy for the taxpayers by managing them more effectively? Governor Huckabee, can you be an activist president with respect to health, wellness and prevention efforts designed to give our seniors a better life?

I want Joe Biden to share with us his plans to encourage more of our health professionals to become geriatricians.

One of South Carolina's most innovative efforts has been to create a geriatric loan forgiveness program which has resulted in board certified geriatricians agreeing to accept forgiveness of medical school loans in return for coming here to treat our seniors. As a result of these incentives and other innovative, forward-looking ideas we have increased our state's number of geriatricians by one third. Still, America needs thirty-six thousand more by 2030 to care for our aged citizens. Yet, we manage to certify only slightly more than three hundred geriatricians annually—largely because the federal health programs that spend billions of dollars each year on senior medical care do not reward these critical skills.

Senator Biden, will you provide national leadership that will create incentives to persuade more doctors and nurses to become skilled in geriatric care?

A great success for South Carolina is its one-of-a-kind Seniors Information Cube, which brings together data from multiple sources so that we can make evidence-based decisions on senior policies.

We need and expect the next president of the United States to explain how our country will expand its geriatrics knowledge base.

Will Rudy Giuliani, if elected president, follow South Carolina's lead and push for similar cooperative, information-sharing efforts at the national level? Mayor Giuliani, will you promote new research, new ideas and ultimately new cures that will improve the health of our seniors?

In just over 100 days the candidates will be asking South Carolina voters to set them on the path to the White House. Do they understand that more than one out of every three votes cast in South Carolina primaries last spring came from our seniors? For the record – and the candidates' contemplation – voters who were 65 and older accounted for 33.9% of the Republican primary ballots last spring and 31.2% of the Democratic ones.

And so I would ask, what is it that is holding our would-be Presidents back from actively engaging senior's issues? What better place than here, and what better time than now?

If the candidates will develop position statements on senior issues, I will ensure that South Carolina's senior community has an opportunity to study them. Only by addressing these concerns publicly and comprehensively is it possible for the single largest voting bloc in South Carolina to make a proper decision about whom it should choose to send to the White House.

The future is rapidly becoming the present. We already have 772,000 citizens 65 and older. Remember when turning 100 brought a mention from Willard Scott on TV? TODAY, we have almost seven-hundred

people in South Carolina who are 100 or older – and more than forty of them are 110 or better!

We are doing great things for seniors in our state. As of November 1, legislation we passed this year in Columbia means that sales taxes on grocery items will be eliminated. That's right, effective November 1, the tax is zero. This will be a tremendous help to people on limited retirement incomes.

But this does not resolve our concern. Our older seniors– particularly those older than 85 – are still edging into a world of negatives, a world that is marked by faltering health, the loss of spouse and friends, cognitive impairment, and limitations on their activities of daily living.

Our concern, therefore, is to provide incentives, innovations and information so that older South Carolinians can be active, be contributory, be independent, and enjoy longer, higher-quality, and more productive and fulfilling lives. Meanwhile, we must continue our efforts to build protections and services to help those who cannot help themselves. We must develop strategies to incorporate active and healthy senior volunteers into our schools, our medical system, and the numerous faith-based and humanitarian groups found throughout our great country.

Aging is a common experience of this diverse world. It touches us all in ways that we often don't notice, let alone anticipate. Our youngest baby boomers are building careers, and suddenly find themselves sandwiched between their care giving obligations to their aging parents and to their young children – while still working to establish their own secure future for retirement.

This is South Carolina. And we are a conservative state. I am a fiscal conservative and in case you think I have turned my back on that conservatism please rest assured that I have not. My priorities are in order and by prompting a comprehensive discussion of our priorities, we will ensure that the needy are separated from the greedy and that those who are deserving of our compassion and good will shall receive it.

But the 2006 election has clearly given us directions. It has shown us that, as conservatives, when we are NOT true to our core principles -- when we do NOT stand for efficient and accountable government -- when we allow the taxpayer's treasury to be squandered by bureaucratic buffoonery and ineptitude -- when we allow lobbyists greater access to policy than the taxpayers -- then we demonstrate that we are incapable of serving those in need and we have broken a sacred trust.

In South Carolina our taxes are high enough. We have the money we need, and in fact our tax code actually inhibits the kind of income growth that would fuel additional revenues to our state. We have the governmental infrastructure. What we lack is the political will to ensure that our governmental agencies are on task, efficient, transparent and absolutely committed to service. We need leadership to transform public employees into public servants. We need leadership to allow them to innovate, grow and adapt, not to be bound by fear or to be enslaved by low expectations. Yes -- we are equipped, but we need leadership to unlock our tremendous potential.

We have everything we need monetarily and structurally -- but what we do not have is a public discussion that will lead to a compact between our leaders and our citizens -- a compact that in no uncertain terms states that caring for the needs of our seniors is not an option but a sacred, even joyous, obligation. Until we demand more from our elected leaders, more from our governmental institutions, more from our churches and humanitarian organizations -- more from ourselves -- we are leaving the Graying of America to chance. And that is unacceptable.

The vision of the Lieutenant Governor's Office on Aging is a South Carolina where seniors enjoy an enhanced quality of life, contribute to their communities, have economic security, and receive those supports necessary to age with choices and with dignity. It is my job to be the prime advocate for that vision.

Today I am striving to begin a conversation between the citizens of South Carolina and the men and women who would hold the most powerful office in the world. From this discussion I pray that we

develop sound policy that will lead us into a successful and proud Graying of America.

I promise you that our mature South Carolinians will continue to receive my best efforts. Please, join me, and together, we can achieve great things for South Carolina.

Thank you, and God Speed.